

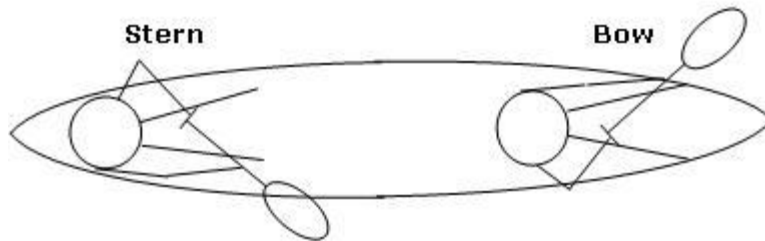
canoe Steering

Steering your canoe, getting it to go where you want, when you want, will be the most challenging part of learning to canoe for most people. Understanding and applying the basic keys of canoe steering will help you learn more quickly (and with less frustration) once you get out on the water.

Key #1: Paddling Roles

The person paddling in the **front** is called the **bowman**. The primary purpose of the bowman is to “provide power.” The bowman also sets the pace, watches for obstacles the sternman may not be able to see, and alerts the sternman when they see an imminent obstacle (a rock, stump, etc.).

The person in **back** is called the **sternman**, and their primary responsibility is to steer. The sternman also calls out “Switch” when it’s time to switch sides, and calls out “Right **Draw**” or “Left **Draw**” when he needs the bowman’s help to steer.



Key #2: Paddle On Opposite Sides

As a basic rule of thumb, the bowman and sternman should always paddle on opposite sides of the canoe. This will help your boat go straighter, and it will make it more stable.

Key #3: Paddle In Time With Each Other

You should both begin and end each stroke simultaneously. The bowman sets the pace, the sternman takes each stroke in sync with the bowman. This will maximize your efficiency and stability.

Key #4: Get Your Boat Trim

Your “trim” is how level (or unlevel) the canoe sits in the water. If you weigh 200lb and your paddling partner weighs 80lb, your boat will not be sitting level in the water unless you load down your partner’s end of the boat with rocks or something (such as loading all your gear in the “light” end of the canoe). A level boat goes straighter, and is much easier to steer, so it is worth the effort to find a way to make your boat trim (level).

Key #5: Accept That Your Canoe Will Not Go Strait

Every time you take a forward stroke, either in the bow or the stern, it doesn’t just move your boat forward, it slightly changes your direction too. It is virtually impossible for you to paddle a canoe in a perfectly straight line, so go ahead and release yourself (and your paddling partner) from this expectation.

When you take a forward stroke on the right, it will begin to turn your boat to the left, and a forward stroke on the left will turn your boat slightly right.

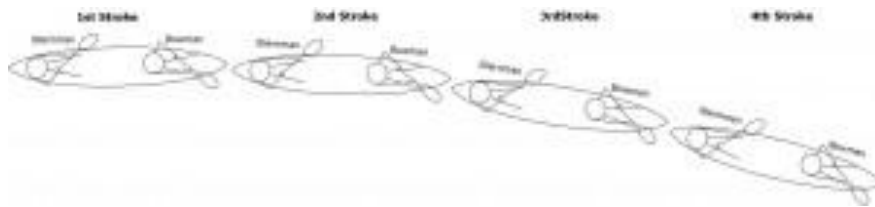
Now, assuming you and your partner are of similar weight and strength, every forward stroke by the sternman will turn the boat more dramatically than the forward stroke of the bowman. The only time this is not true is if the bowman is significantly heavier and/or stronger than the sternman.

Now that you know those five basic keys, you are well on your way to a happy steering experience, and ready to learn the basic concepts of steering.

Basic Steering Concepts: Going Straight Using The “J” Stroke

Many recreational paddlers do most of their steering using a “J” stroke in the stern (a “J” stroke is simply a small **sweep**).

With the bowman paddling on the right and the sternman paddling on the left, with each stroke forward the boat will turn slightly right. Basically, the boat will always tend to go the opposite direction of the side the sternman is paddling on.



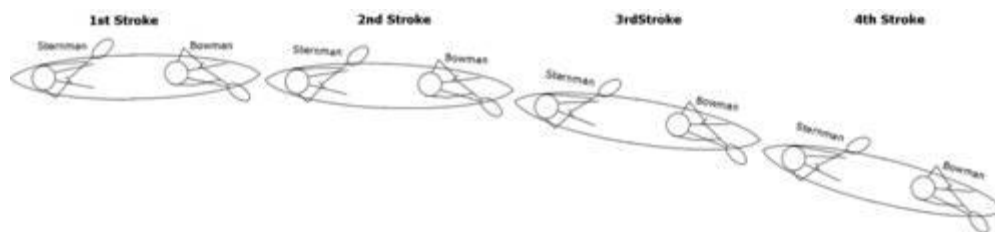
To correct this, the sternman can simply do a small [sweep](#) every 3 – 5 strokes to straiten out the course. (NOTE: A [sweep](#) on the left turns you left, and sweep on the right turns you right.)

Keep in mind, a [sweep](#) is ultimately a backward stroke, so it will slow down your forward progress. It's also a very effective steering stroke, so if you do a big, powerful sweep you could easily end up turning the boat too much.

Basic Steering Concepts: Going Straight “Racing Style”

Want to save energy and improve your speed? Then try out this method used by canoe racers and long distance paddlers that need to maximize their efficiency.

So when you start out paddling, with the sternman on the left and the bowman on the right, the sternman's forward strokes on the left progressively turn the boat right.



The most energy efficient way to straighten out your course is to simply switch sides.

Once you have switched sides, you are now starting out already turned a bit to the right of where you want to be.. It will take a few strokes after you've switched sides for the boat to correct it's course. Just about the time your boat is going straight again it will start heading left, and it will be time to switch sides again.



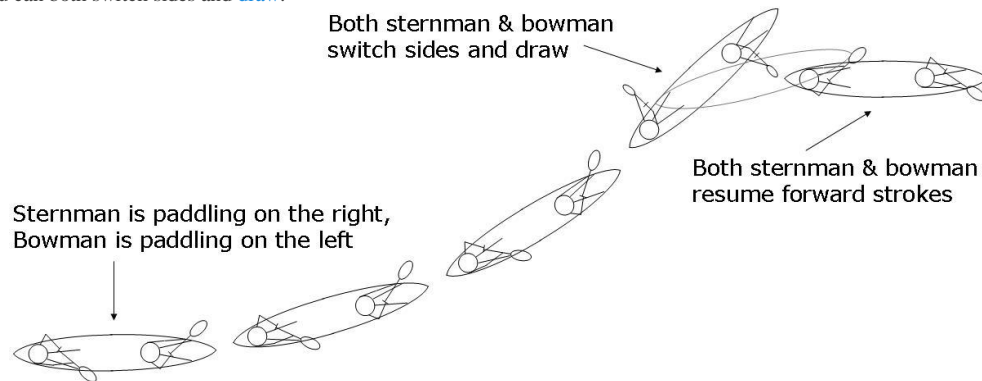
How many strokes it takes for your canoe to start turning will vary widely (depending on factors like your trim, strength differences, your boat, wind, and water currents). Pick a point in the distance to paddle toward and then count how many strokes you take before you really start turning off course (45 degrees or more), then once you switch sides, count how many strokes it takes before you are off course the other direction. After a dozen or so “switches” keeping track of the number of strokes in between, you'll start to figure out about how often you will need to switch.

Once it clicks, this is a really fun way to steer a boat, but it does take some effort. Don't beat yourself up if it doesn't make sense right away. If you keep working at it, you will figure it out eventually. If it gets too frustrating, just revert to the “J” stroke method.

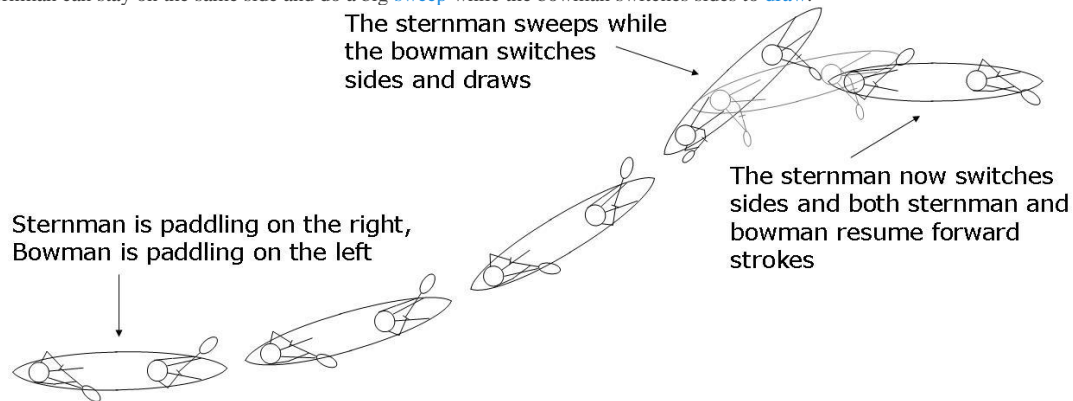
Basic Steering Concepts: Turning

Not all of canoeing is going in a straight line—sometimes you need to turn to get where you want to go. And sometimes serious turning maneuvers are required when you are trying to go straight and it isn't working very well.

That is when you really start to use [Draws](#) and [Sweeps](#). Now lets say your boat really gets turning off course, or you need to make a hard turn. At this point, you can both switch sides and [draw](#).



Or, the sternman can stay on the same side and do a big [sweep](#) while the bowman switches sides to [draw](#).



Either combination will turn your boat quickly and effectively. If one sweep or draw isn't enough, keep sweeping and/or drawing until your boat is headed where you want it, then proceed paddling forward again.

Final Thoughts

For some reason, the process of steering a canoe can be really stressful for some people—especially when you're just learning and you have an audience. It's very easy to get totally frustrated with your paddling partner when the boat won't seem to go where you want it to.

So remember—canoes don't travel in straight lines, and not everything is you (or your partner's) fault – it's often the wind and/or current that's messing you up. Give yourselves a break!

Take it slow and give yourself time to figure out how to steer your boat under your unique paddling circumstances. You'll have so much more fun if you get rid of unrealistic expectations and just work with it until it starts coming together. Interestingly enough, it all starts coming together much faster when you're not freaking out (surprised much?). Keep it cool and enjoy the ride people.